

July 25, 2007

□

Introduction

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the commission. It is an honor to have been invited by you to come and testify today to the commission about Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities. As the only Assyrian-American member of the entire Congress, I have a deeply personal interest in this issue.

Obviously, I'm proud to be a first-generation American of Assyrian and Armenian descent. My Assyrian grandparents fled their ancestral homelands in what was then the Ottoman Empire, now the northern border area between Iraq and Iran, in the early part of the 20th century. In fact, my mother received her first holy communion in Baghdad in the midst of her family's escape from the chaos that has historically plagued this part of the world.

Today, as you might know, there are approximately 400,000 Assyrian-Americans in the United States, and they are all Christians. Some are Chaldeans; and this is the oldest rite under Rome, as well as Jacobites, Armenians, Greek Orthodox, Mandeans, and others. They have been subject to chronic and brutal persecution in their homeland, and by all accounts, their oppression has only worsened since the fall of Saddam Hussein. They represent the oldest surviving Christian population in the world, and one that, without help, is literally facing the brink of extinction.

Just parenthetically, I speak Assyrian. I do; I can speak it rather fluently - not as quickly as I would like to. And I do understand the language very well. Today, the numbers of Christians remaining in Iraq, mainly in the Nineveh plain in the north around Mosul, are rapidly diminishing. Those remaining live in villages that can trace their history back to over 2,000 years ago. They still celebrate their liturgies in Aramaic, which is the language that Jesus spoke. So these are the indigenous Christians in that part of the world.

I've met with several prominent Assyrian leaders in recent years, some of whom are here today. And without exception, they've communicated to me their genuine desire to embrace the opportunity before them to move away from the totalitarianism of the Hussein regime toward greater prosperity and stability by cooperating in the development of a democratic and pluralistic state. But religious and ethnic tensions, unchecked acts of discrimination, and unspeakable acts of violence continue to plague these communities. I think that you might recall the front page of the New York Times last year above the fold in color the church that had been bombed and burned out, and the members of that parish surrounding it.

Now, in my discussion with leaders in Congress and those representing Assyrian communities in Iraq, there are two factors, which I believe contribute significantly to the current crisis. My own observation is that Assyrians - and they are, I believe - the largest ethnic religious minority in Iraq - are in so many ways victims of geography. During my grandparents' time, they weren't even considered second-class citizens. And so, they were small communities that kept to themselves because they were Christian. They have, in these times, when I traveled to Baghdad, and more than once, and meeting with our military, they were very familiar with the Assyrians, and said, they have lived side-by-side with Sunnis, with Shi'a, and have really gotten along with everyone there. But they represent, obviously, a very, very small part of the overall population.

Getting back to what contributes significantly, I believe, to be what is a crisis, first the persistent indications that Iraq's religious minority populations do not receive by any means their fair share of development assistance. I wish I had a penny for every time someone asked me about my surname and what is it. It is very unfamiliar. There is a real unfamiliarity with people from that part of the world, certainly Assyrians.

Because they represent such a small community, their voice in national politics is relatively weak. There is some representation in the parliament; I have met with them. When I've traveled to Iraq, I've spoken to the head of the country and pointed this out, they listened. They really did not - subject matter didn't grab them, let's say. Funding for reconstruction, for housing, for education, are parceled out by central authorities to those who control the villages and the regions where they reside, without really sufficient transparency to ensure the proper parity between different ethnic and religious communities.

I attempted to address this issue two years ago by offering an amendment to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for fiscal years 2006 and 2007. My amendment called on the State

Department and all relevant U.S. agencies to direct their attention to the needs of Iraq's indigenous religious minorities. I am pleased to say it received unanimous approval in the House of Representatives.

But since its passage, little evidence has been presented to indicate that progress is being made to assist these communities and the people that reside in them. Meanwhile, reports continue about Iraqi minorities being targets of kidnappings, bombings, assassinations, and acts of violence, due to their religious practices and beliefs. My appeals to the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of Defense, and other federal entities have unfortunately received faint acknowledgement.

The visible result of this neglect has been the current crisis of Iraqi refugees, which the chairman spoke of in his opening statement. This brings me to the second area where I see a serious failure in our current policy. When I offered my amendment in 2005, I quoted estimates on the floor of the House indicating that as many as 80,000 Iraqi Christians out of a population previously estimated to be 1.2 million have fled Iraq. Today, two years later, I've seen reports indicating that as many as half of the entire Iraqi Christian population has left the country, fled the country, with thousands more internally displaced within Iraq.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Christians today make up approximately 3 percent of Iraq's population. But they represent nearly 40 percent of the total number of refugees fleeing Iraq. That's a stunning statistic. In fact, Iraqi refugees now comprise some 14 percent of the Jordanian population, another stunning figure. Here in the United States, we have had and will continue to have an emotionally charged debate about issues surrounding undocumented immigrants. Imagine for a moment what the tenor of the debate would be if we were facing an influx of the proportions that I just stated.

Often those who flee their homes and leave Iraq encounter governments not willing to grant legal status or assistance or the right to employment. This is a tragic situation that requires, I believe, a comprehensive and assertive response to resolve the many issues facing the displaced, and to adequately provide for the safety of those remaining in Iraq.

In the last month, 73 of my House colleagues joined me in writing to President Bush urging him to take seriously the grave warnings which were personally expressed to him by his Holiness, Pope Benedict, for Iraq's endangered Christian population. As the pope laid out to the president in clear and unequivocal terms, we're witnessing the emergence of an Iraq that

simply does not tolerate Christians and religious minorities. Clearly, the rights of minority groups are not being protected in Iraq. And I'm convinced that without really important and drastic improvement in the current situation, we may well witness the complete loss of the Iraqi indigenous Christian community. And I think that would be absolutely tragic.

I continue to work on this issue in Congress. Last month, we passed a provision in the fiscal year 2008 Department of State and Foreign Appropriations bill requiring that \$10 million be provided directly to assist religious minorities in the Nineveh Plain region of northern Iraq. We have our work cut out for us to protect this provision - as my wonderful colleague Chris Shays would fully appreciate, to protect this provision as the bill goes to conference. But I believe that between this funding allocation and the very broad bipartisan support in the House, all of my colleagues that signed the letter to the president, I'm hopeful that our work to promote attention to the welfare of Iraq's religious minority populations will bear fruit.

Of course, all of this is under the umbrella of the ongoing war, and war is hell. But this particular group of minorities, Christians in Iraq, I think little known, little appreciated, is suffering enormously. So in closing, I'm very grateful to everyone here today that has come here today. There are people that are in the audience that have traveled from across the country to be here today, which underscores the importance of the issue and the depth of their passions about the issue as well as their knowledge of it.

And certainly, to you, all of the commissioners, it's a source of pride to me that the Congress established this Commission on International Religious Freedom. This is an important hearing and I am really honored to have been invited by you to be here today. This is obviously a critical issue that has yet to receive its proper recognition and a response to it. And because I am a person of great hope and the great faith that my family instilled in me - and it took great faith for them to have endured what they did, the stories that my grandparents related to me as a child on their knee - I think speaks to the people that I've testified on behalf of today. And I think this hearing can really help to strengthen the case to assist the beleaguered Christians in Iraq as well as those that still call it their homeland and hopefully can return there someday in peace and be able to practice the faith of their fathers.

Thank you very, very much.